BALZAC AS A SOCIAL HISTORIAN

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BALZAC AS A SOCIAL HISTORIAN

One of Balzac's greatest ambitions was to be recognized as a social historian. He wanted not only to continue the work of Walter Scott in elevating the novel into the realm of history, but also to write a complete history of contemporary French society. This complete history was to be the *Comédie humaine*. He spoke of the *Comédie*, while planning it, as an "histoire de moeurs," a vast project which would embrace not only history but social criticism as well. Just as Buffon depicted the various phases of zoological life and described the various species, Balzac promised to describe the classes of men in their environment. The *Comédie* therefore would treat of men, women, and their institutions; it would include people of all social classes and of all ages; and in addition to painting faithfully the various phases of human life it would reveal the "moteur social" which makes men behave as they do toward one another, and it would indicate certain fundamental principles which determine the trends of society.

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Much has already been written on the *Comédie humaine*, and many critics have recognized its author as a social historian. But in spite of the great number of Balzac studies, much material which appears treating the novelist as "historian," "sociologist," "political theorist," "social theorist," "moralist," "criminologist," "royalist," "Catholic," "socialist," etc., consists of narrow theses neglecting, overlooking, or belittling significant portions of Balzac's works which might very well support contradictory theses. Many of these studies deal primarily with Balzac's beliefs and conclusions; they fail to point out the relation of contemporary events and conditions to his ideas, and they overlook the fact that his ideas are often weakened by the results of his own analytical study of social conditions and trends. Thus many critics have failed to discover the true character of Balzac's social criticism.

The scope of this present study, therefore, is to examine Balzac as an analytical student and recorder of contemporary society, and to treat impartially and in a rather thorough manner his rôle as a social critic. No attempt is made to include all the minor problems, customs, and events which Balzac includes in his *Comédie.* An effort is made, however, to treat what are considered to be the major social problems, the most important institutions, the prevailing customs, the dominant attitudes, and the more serious and meaningful trends of Balzac's society.

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The source material of this study is the *Comédie humaine* in its entirety. With few exceptions, every novel, novelette, and short story of that work was found to be very useful. In examining the words of the many characters in the *Comédie,* an effort has been made to ascertain to what degree their thoughts reveal Balzac's own opinions, the antitheses of his ideas, or merely current beliefs. In studying the deeds of these same characters we have had to discriminate between customary and exceptional behavior. In discussing social conditions or social-type characters, we have not overlooked the elements of romantic affectations or propagandistic intentions.

In clarifying, synthesizing, emphasizing, and interpreting the observations made in the *Comédie humaine,* valuable aids have been found in Balzac's correspondence, prefaces, biographies, and miscellaneous works.

The core of this dissertation consists of Chapters IV and V, entitled "BALZAC, CRITIC OF HIS AGE" and "SOCIO-ECONOMIC CLASSES" respectively, in which are presented the manifold reactions of Balzac to the society of his day, the various strata of society, an analysis of the important institutions, and an enumeration and discussion of the more serious social problems confronting the early nineteenth century.

BALZAC, CRITIC OF HIS AGE

1. Unbridled individualism or unscrupulous egoism, along

with its consequences, is one of the most recurrent themes in the *Comédie humaine*. Balzac's attack on the principle of individualism is twofold. On the one hand, he extolls in direct exposition the virtues of the family of old, in sharp contrast with the lack of family cohesion and family spirit in post-revolutionary France. On the other hand, his narratives and character portrayals reveal to us the spirit of individualism in action, as found in contemporary society, and we learn to judge that spirit not so much from Balzac's direct personal indictments as from a study of the consequences of individualistic attitudes and practices. The evil consequences of individualism, according to Balzac, were a loss of family spirit resulting in the disintegration of the family of old, and a loss of respect for governmental authority leading to social and economic anarchy. The rugged individualists of the *Comédie* have no civic spirit; they are flatterers, hypocrites, and liars, calculating, daring, callous, and brutal.

2. With the abolition of the hereditary privileges, which the Old Régime granted to the aristocracy, and with the encouragement of individualism, money became the mark of personal distinction. Financial calculations invade every thought of Balzac's ambitious characters. His young men soon discover that money alone will open the gates of success, and once this discovery is made, every energy is expended to acquire wealth honestly or dishonestly. Money is made by industry, hard work, and economy, by land speculation, by playing the stock market, by diplomacy, by shameless usury, by marriage alliances, and by exploiting the people's credulity.

Because society places too much emphasis on financial success, love of money helps to destroy family love. In many cases love of money results in abnormal desires for accumulation of gold for its own sake, and money-mad maniacs become either anti-social or socially useless beings. Accumulation of great sums of money gives some men tremendous power and control over society.

3. Like many who longed for the "good old days" Balzac saw in the Old Régime forces which made for respect for

authority, moderation, restraint, order, and stability. But he saw in post-revolutionary France the advantages of commerce, banking, industry, and transportation. A return to the Old Régime politically would also mean a return economically, and the nation would be deprived of these advantages. Yet Balzac saw in the reign of industrialism and representative government seeds of anarchy, tyranny, the rule of mediocrity, and the subordination of talent and intelligence to money. His two perspectives motivated him to suggest what amounts to a reconciliation of the conflicting principles of the old and new order.

Modern democratic governments, Balzac declared, are bound to fail because they are not based upon education, intelligence, and obedience, and because the modern state is made up of conflicting interests. The democratic movement, he demonstrated, did not really abolish the privileged classes; it simply created new ones to replace the old. The rich instead of the nobles became the privileged people, and the evil of social inequality increased.

Balzac criticized representative government for its decentralization, instability, susceptibility to bribery, partiality toward the rich, neglect of youth, bureaucracy of mediocrities, lack of coordination, inefficiency, and confusion in general.

4. Balzac was aware of the fact that religion and government, the Church and the State, had been, and still were in his day, complements of one another.

One of Balzac's important premises is that man is neither good nor bad. He insisted that it is man's material interests which corrupt him and develop in him his evil tendencies. Such tendencies, the causes of conflict in society, have to be held in check and repressed. He offers Catholicism as the repressive agent. Yet the *Comédie* as a whole treats the Catholic Church unfavorably. Nowhere in that work does Catholic repression result in anything good.

The novelist criticizes the Church for not associating itself with the interests of the masses. He rejects monastic life and celibacy in favor of active, creative, well-balanced

living. But he supports the political rôle of religion—to help stabilize society by giving consolation and hope to the masses.

5. Balzac gives a rather scanty treatment of the educational theory and practice of his day, but he makes some thought-provoking criticisms of the educational system. He rejects the quasi-monastic life of the "collège." He ridicules the superficiality of the Universities and finds fault with the technical schools for attempting to teach too much to people who are too young.

The novelist was interested in the education of women, and although he warns against the meager and repressive religious instruction of old, he does not offer a liberal educational program for women without reservations.

6. As a student of law Balzac had had an opportunity to study the numerous problems that the institution of marriage presented to society. He discusses some of these problems in the *Comédie*. He points out that woman is very often the slave of her husband, that too many marriages are nothing more than business alliances or financial transactions, and that some marriages are only perfunctory ceremonies performed to meet the requirements of society, to put up an artificial front which provide legal heirs to men's fortunes and to serve as a shield for illicit conduct. Balzac also shows how hasty marriages made without considering the possible consequences, often result in incompatibilities which force either or both parties of the union to practice adultery. He studied the social significance of adultery and arrives at the sensible and obvious conclusion that while bad marriages almost inevitably lead to adultery, adultery is not altogether a satisfactory solution.

7. Paris is the background for many of Balzac's novels. While the novelist neglects many aspects of city life in Paris, his various descriptions of the Capital, when taken altogether, give us a rather extensive picture of the city. Paris is the place where all men of energies assemble, a place with callousness toward the suffering and the dying, a place of feverish activity. The Capital is dominated by customs and institutions which promote demoralization.

Balzac describes Paris in the manner of Dante's description of Hell. The city is divided into four spheres, in which the four strata of society dwell. In the first sphere dwells the proletariat; in the second, the petty bourgeoisie; in the third, the big business man and his satellites; and in the fourth, the artistic world. The novelist proceeds to demonstrate that in each of these spheres the mad activity in search of gold and pleasure leads only to physical and moral decay.

8. That the artist, scientist, poet, in a word, the man of genius has always been more or less neglected Balzac well understood. But he considers the bourgeois age essentially antagonistic to the development of the arts. To the bourgeoisie the young poet, painter, or musician has always been a *meurt-de-faim* or a *va-nu-pieds*. Talented people, therefore, have remained starvelings because the bourgeoisie has been more interested in material goods than in the spiritual expression of gifted people. Society's neglect of talent and its scorn for art is a problem of deep concern to Balzac, for his own life is one long struggle with conditions and attitudes which tend to stifle genius.

9. Since the Revolution, one of France's greatest tasks has been the solution of its land problem. The breaking up of large estates beginning with the sale of national lands during the Revolution, and the equal distribution of the parent's wealth among all his children, as prescribed by the Civil Code, augured the eventual disappearance of large land holdings. Already in Balzac's day, peasants were trying to make a living on ridiculously small plots of land. This problem was aggravated by speculators who bought land, divided it into tiny lots, and resold it to land hungry peasants. Small scale production made it difficult not only for the cultivators but also for the nation as a whole. Although Balzac's approach to the agricultural problem was correct, he was somewhat too pessimistic about economic trends, and not having valuable statistics at his disposal, much of his discussion borders on the theoretical. In his day he could not foresee the aid which the growth of science and industry could give to agriculture in the way of

tools and scientific advice, nor the reduction in the cost of transportation with the development of railroads.

10. One of the most significant results of the French Revolution was the intensification of the class struggle. Peasant uprisings, class hatreds, and clashes were never quite so serious as after the Napoleonic era. Balzac says very little about the class conflicts in the cities, but of the animosities in the country he paints a detailed and vivid picture. When the peasantry is involved, whether it be against the nobility or the bourgeoisie, the battle is bitter. This intensification of economic strife supplies Balzac with more ammunition for the indictment of the socio-political set up of post-revolutionary France.

11. Many other people besides Balzac found the political, social, and economic conditions of the Restoration and the July Monarchy unsatisfactory. They did not want a return to the Old Régime. They interpreted the Revolution as a historical necessity, being aware at the same time of the accompanying evils. To overcome these evils they initiated a number of reform movements including socialism, communism, anarchism, and many varieties of utopianism. Balzac has fundamental differences with these radical movements. He fears the destruction of private property.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC CLASSES

1. Balzac considered the nobility a doomed class, for after the Revolution the nobles, finding themselves ruined by the partition and sale of their lands, lost their sense of responsibility to the aristocracy as a whole, lost their sense of unity, became opportunistic, and sought riches for their own particular families. For a number of reasons the nobility lost its solidarity and became a discordant body, helpless before its enemies.

Much of the *Comédie humaine* is devoted to lamentation and regret for the disappearance of the old aristocracy. But a critical reader cannot help feeling that Balzac is attached to the nobility only sentimentally.

While Balzac esteems highly the nobility of old, he does not find the younger generation so virtuous. The younger nobles do not cling to "honor". They are tainted with a desire for money. They like to rival the "nouveaux riches" in display of wealth or become social snobs, disdaining all things not pertaining to the nobility. The attitudes and activities of the younger nobles help to bring about a more speedy liquidation of the aristocracy before the onslaught of the bourgeoisie.

The strongest class in the *Comédie* is unquestionably the bourgeoisie. Whereas the nobility is portrayed as a stagnant and even decaying class, Balzac recognizes in the bourgeoisie an aggressiveness, a force, an ingenuity, a practicality, and an inventiveness that make for growth and progress. He seems to admire the simplicity, honesty, loyalty, and family cohesion of the "vieille bourgeoisie". But he treats rather unfavorably the modern bourgeoisie. In the latter class Balzac finds hypocrites, back-slapping politicians, misers, usurers, legal criminals, and economic dictators.

Balzac dwells at length on the low intellectual status of the bourgeoisie as a whole. The importance that this class attached to material wealth absorbed all its energies and conditioned its members to a dull monotonous life, lacking any sort of intellectual stimulus.

3. The picture which Balzac painted of the conditions of the peasantry is gloomy. His peasants live in wretched quarters ,and their general environment includes poverty, illiteracy, squalor, and moral looseness. Their poor hygienic conditions lead them to physical degeneracy and their lack of responsibility to moral degeneracy.

The low standard of living dictates to the peasants their outlook on life, their reaction to the Church, their attitudes toward the other classes, their moral scruples, their very conduct. The peasants are in no position to develop anything beyond a primitive culture. Their activities as well as their thoughts center about keeping the body alive and finding ways of escaping their miseries. They have a strong attachment to their few belongings. They look upon marriage as a purely

materialistic institution. They want children because the latter are considered an economic asset. They feel that they are exploited by the nobility, the Church, and the bourgeoisie, but in spite of their spirit of aggression and defiance toward their economic enemies, the peasants are rather forced to accept the sum total of their fate in a spirit of resignation.

4. The proletariat occupies an insignificant position in the *Comédie humaine*. In his few scattered references to the city workers, Balzac speaks of them as people without a future, living from hand to mouth, toiling from morning to night the entire week, only to find themselves without a cent the day after payday.

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In the numerous Balzac studies many contradictory conclusions have been drawn. The *Comédie* has been variously called the work of a prophet, a dreamer, a materialist, a realist, a romanticist, a pessimist, and a fatalist. Some have criticized the work for preaching too much dogmatic morality, others for fostering too much scepticism, still others for promoting immorality. The causes of the sharp disagreement are manifold: a) Few students of Balzac have really been impartial. b) Some critics have been more concerned with literary theories than with content. c) Others have let Balzac's own pronouncements, contradictory in themselves, shadow his product. d) Balzac's ideas are complex. e) Few scholars have taken the trouble to study more than a small fraction of Balzac's works, and consequently they have failed to see the unity and comprehensiveness of the *Comédie humaine*. In the face of the contradictory conclusions hitherto drawn it is hoped that this dissertation will help in establishing Balzac's reputation as a social historian by bringing forth factual material necessary for the removal of the existing confusion.

How faithfully does Balzac reproduce contemporary society? This study reveals that, on the whole, the novelist is a successful social historian, because he treats minutely and maturely a good number of the major political, social, and economic problems of his day. To this we may add that he

makes his discussion of the major issues richer by the addition of numerous minor issues, which often throw considerable light on the greater problems. Balzac is at his best when he describes social conditions; in this respect, he is neither surpassed nor equaled by any other writer of his time. In discussing the social problems facing men, he penetrates broadly and deeply with an incisive analysis that exposes the hidden aspects of the problems. His solutions, however, appear to be illogically drawn in the light of his own analysis. Balzac's conservative fears would have him preserve the very causes of the effects he despises. In discovering trends he is often farsighted, and his clarity of vision makes him fear the logical consequences of historical developments. This helps to explain why Balzac was frequently the enemy of the most elemental forms of liberalism.

The principal findings of this study of the *Comédie humaine* are the following:

1. An arsenal of facts in support of a condemnation of Balzac's age as too materialistic, too competitive and cruel, and too shallow or mediocre intellectually.

2. A microscopic inspection of governmental theory and practice, of political economy, and of social institutions.

3. A study of the political and social rôle of religion.

4. A representation of a vast collection of major and minor events which can well be used as source material by professional historians.

5. A rich description of customs and manners of the French people.

6. An interesting presentation of country life and some aspects of city life.

7. A study of methods of earning a living and acquiring great wealth.

8. A living picture of France divided into four socio-economic classes, with a vivid reproduction of the class conflicts among them.

9. An excellent presentation of social-type characters.

These findings support Balzac's claim to recognition as a

social historian, even though his social history comes to us in the form of a novel.

However, in considering Balzac as social historian we must point out serious omissions of the *Comédie humaine,* As a result of this study a set of negative findings have been made:

1. Although children make up a large section of society and constitute its future, Balzac has only mentioned them casually.

2. Balzac has failed to give a complete picture of the educational system. Although he has made some valuable hostile criticism of the educational theory and practice of his day, he has not offered much information, valuable educational statistics.

3. Since a number of University men dominated the political thinking of the July Monarchy, it would have been particularly useful to treat the professor in reconstituting the politico-intellectual atmosphere of the period.

4. The novelist has failed to appreciate the growing democratic movement. While many of his criticisms of what passed for democracy were just, he neglected, slurred over, or ridiculed much of the best of that ideal which, historically speaking, was to be the center of discussion for many years to come.

5. The *Comédie* has neglected several important aspects of rural life in a country that was still predominantly agricultural.

6. Balzac has failed to give the artisans a fair representation in the *Comédie.*

7. In view of the tremendous importance of marriage as an institution, and particularly in view of Balzac's insistence upon the unity and stability of the family, we should expect him to give more attention to marriage and to suggest possible solutions of its various problems.

8. Our social historian has neglected many of the most important aspects of scientific progress, the consequent boom in industry, and industrial evils.

It is obvious that with these omissions Balzac's picture of contemporary society is not complete. It would be too much to expect any writer to reproduce both faithfully and completely more than a fraction of complex modern society. In spite of all his shortcomings, however, Balzac stands out as the most thorough analyst of his age.

To indicate the contribution of this dissertation to the study of Balzac we can point out the essential differences between this work and previous ones on Balzac:

1. While the other studies either totally neglect or subordinate Balzac, the social historian, this dissertation makes such a topic its central theme. Although some attention has been given in the voluminous Balzac bibliography to the topics found in this work, the unity of these topics is itself a contribution. However, this thesis offers something more than a collection and a unified treatment of elements which have been diversely presented in scattered studies. Since the material studied represents selections from a vast work, students of Balzac as a social historian have not agreed in their choices. This dissertation contributes new material pertinent to the study undertaken.

2. Unlike previous works in which Balzac is discussed as a historian or a sociologist, this study subordinates Balzac's personal views to his findings.

3. While other works tend to isolate Balzac from his environment, this study is an attempt to place him in his historical milieu and, as far as possible, to relate his social picture to accepted facts.

VITA

Jean Saba was born in Rionero, Italy, November 19, 1914. In March, 1924, he immigrated to the United States and became a naturalized citizen in 1929.

He began his elementary education in Italy and completed it in Marion, Illinois. He completed his high school education in three years (1930-33) in the Marion Township High Schol. From 1933 to 1937 he studied at Southern Illinois State Normal University and received the degree of Bachelor of Education with honors in June, 1937. In 1937 he entered the Graduate School of the University of Illinois as Scholar in Romance Languages and received the degree of Master of Arts in 1938. From 1938 to 1940 he continued his studies in the Graduate School of the University of Illinois as Fellow in Romance Languages.

His graduate studies have included French, Italian, and Spanish Literature and French History under Professors J. F. Jackson, T. E. Oliver, S. F. Will, D. H. Carnahan, R. Michaud, J. Van Horne, A. Hamilton, R. P. Stearns, and F. S. Rodkey.

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